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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000190

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TAGS: PGOV IZ

SUBJECT: WASIT IHEC LEADER PREDICTS ELECTIONS IN 2008

Classified By: Wasit PRT Team Leader Wade Weems. Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary. In a January 23 meeting with Wasit PRT Team Leader and Poloffs, Wasit Director of the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) Haydar Abd Allawi said he expected elections to happen in 2008 and expressed a strong preference for an open-list system. He maintained his office could be ready for elections with as little as two months' notice despite challenges related to security and voter education. Although reluctant to discuss politics, Haydar's comments made it clear there is widespread public dissatisfaction with the current provincial and national governments. End Summary.

Details on the election process

¶2. (C) Haydar mentioned recent media reporting on progress with the provincial powers and elections law and said he hoped the Council of Representatives (COR) passed the law soon. He expected elections to happen sometime in 2008 and maintained that everyone in government and public wanted an open-list system. Haydar added that an open-list system was best because "The Iraqi people need an open and simple system." When asked if an open-list system would take power away from the political parties and if candidates capable of competing individually existed in Wasit, Haydar answered "I have only one thing to say about the open list: It is the one way for Iraq to pass from the darkness of tyranny into the light."

¶3. (C) Haydar preferred to focus on the technical details of provincial elections. Registration will require two forms of identification, including a ration card, passport, national ID, or marriage passport. The IHEC will establish seven sub-offices in Kut and fifteen throughout the governorate. Each office will be staffed by twelve workers. On election day, voters must cast their ballot in their resident political district. Sub-offices will generate rolls and voters will be checked off the rolls as they arrive at polling places. Despite the amount of work involved, Haydar maintained that his office could be ready for elections with as little as two months' notice. Haydar said widespread public dissatisfaction meant that either no one would vote out of disenchantment with the democratic process or everyone would vote to completely change the current government.

¶4. (C) Asked about challenges facing his office, Haydar identified security concerns and voter education. On security, he mentioned the possibility of checkpoints and curfews preventing rural voters from voting as well as the need for metal-detector wands, T-walls, and razor wire to secure polling places. On voter education, Haydar pointed to voter illiteracy as the greatest challenge and discussed the possibility of assigning a symbol to each party or individual candidate. He maintained that the government needed authorization to regulate the behavior and message of the media during elections.

Central government a new Saddam

15. (C) Haydar resisted attempts to turn the conversation to politics, repeatedly saying that he was a technical specialist and not a politician. When pressed, he said that the central government pressured the provinces in a manner reminiscent of the Saddam regime and said, "Give us one national minister, or one deputy minister, or at least one director general from Wasit." Haydar said this frustration led people to consider decentralization or regions formation, even though "Iraqi democracy is still in its adolescence, and many people are scared of the concept of regions." Haydar expressed concern that militias would react violently to unfavorable election results. Asked if militias were currently pressuring IHEC, he said no, then added, "Iraq is like any country, it has good qualities and bad qualities. Look at what is happening right now in Kenya."

Cooperation with PRT

16. (C) Haydar agreed to provide the PRT with a list of local civil society organizations capable of working on voter outreach and education projects. He asked the PRT for assistance for his office, including the procurement of an office vehicle.

Comment: Will discontent lead to change?

17. (C) Comment: Haydar's remarks echo similar comments from contacts throughout the south on public dissatisfaction with the current government. It remains to be seen whether this discontent will translate into real political change, and

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Haydar was extremely reluctant to discuss the structural and political obstacles to real reform. His comments also make it clear that militia intimidation and voter manipulation will pose serious threats to the integrity of the voting process. End Comment.

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